

ENGLISH HERITAGE REGISTERED GRADE II*

BRAINTREE DISTRICT COUNCIL

SPAINS HALL

FINCHINGFIELD

GD 1149

TL 680 338

Remains of C16 walled gardens and fishponds, with mid C19 additions, set in an early C19 park for which Humphry Repton provided a plan.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Spains Hall in its present form was built in c 1585 by William Kempe, incorporating portions of an older moated C15 house. He may also have been responsible for making a chain of eight fishponds to ornament the garden façade on the south-east side of the Hall, which appear on a map of his estates in 1618, but it is possible that they may have been of medieval origin. He also created walled gardens to the east of the Hall within which he built a banqueting house and a small park. The male line of the Kempes died out in 1728 and Spains Hall was left to Mary Kempe who had married Sir Swinnerton Dyer in 1727. In 1760 Dyer's nephew, Sir Thomas, sold the estate, by then rather neglected, to Samuel Ruggles, a Bocking Clothier. Samuel and his eldest son both died in 1764 and the younger son John only came of age in 1769. The previous year a fire had destroyed the north-east wing of the Hall, which John then had rebuilt. He used Spains Hall as a bachelor retreat and bequeathed it to his cousin Thomas on his death in 1776. Thomas Ruggles moved from Clare in Suffolk to Spains Hall in 1795 and began a series of repairs and alterations, including the building of a new south-east wing by J A Repton (1775-1860) and the development of the park. Thomas was a lifelong friend of Arthur Young and a contributor to the *Annals of Agriculture*, writing in 1785 on the subject of picturesque farming. In 1807 Ruggles commissioned Humphry Repton (1752-1818) to suggest improvements to the gardens which included notes on the kitchen garden, and a proposal to adapt the fishponds into an informal chain. Young however approved of the fishponds as they stood, having just published a series of articles by Roger North in the *Annals* on the creation of fishponds for utility and ornament. A parish map of 1834 suggests that Ruggles was influenced both by his friend and by his adviser, since it shows Repton's proposal for the ponds partly carried out. Thomas was succeeded in 1813 by John Ruggles who took the additional name of Brise in 1827. John died in 1852 and left the estate to Colonel Sir Samuel Ruggles Brise who added further walls to the gardens and, in the latter

part of the century, created a flower garden on the lawn below the south-east front. Samuel died in 1899, leaving the estate to his son Archibald Weyland Ruggles Brise who updated the rose garden and added herbaceous borders and a pergola (*CL* 1902). Archibald was succeeded in 1939 by Colonel Sir Edward Ruggles Brise, who died in 1942, leaving the estate to Colonel Sir John Ruggles Brise. Few changes have been made to the landscape during the C20, although the gardens have been simplified. The site remains (2000) in single private ownership.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Spains Hall is located in a rural setting just beyond the north-west edge of the village of Finchingfield which lies c 16km north-west of Braintree on the B1053. The c 17ha site is bounded to the south-west and north-west by small country lanes and to the south-east and north-east by farmland. The ground at Spains Hall slopes gently from north-west to south-east to the slight valley in which the fishponds are located.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The main entrance to Spains Hall is from midway along the south-west boundary. A small mid C19 single-storey lodge with decorative bargeboards stands on the south-west side of the road, opposite simple gate piers which mark the entrance to the park c 250m from the Hall. The drive curves north through the park to arrive at the gravelled forecourt below the southwest front. A second lodge, of similar design and date, is located at the north end of the south-west boundary, opposite a straight drive running north-east to the farm and service buildings north of the Hall, with a branch turning south-east to join the main drive in front of the Hall. Although the lodges are mid C19, the drives are earlier and appear in this position on an estate map of 1805. Repton's plan for the grounds included a realignment of the main drive, which was not executed.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

Spains Hall (listed Grade I) is a large red-brick Elizabethan mansion, with some plastered timber framing and decorative gables, roofed in handmade tiles of red clay. It is built in two storeys with attics, to a complex plan with wings extending south-east and north-east. The entrance porch on the south-west front is carried to the full height of the house and faces out over the park. William Kempe built Spains Hall in its present form in c 1585, incorporating within it an earlier moated manor house, and his nephew Robert further beautified it in 1637. Following a fire in 1768, the north-east wing was rebuilt by John Ruggles and at the beginning of the C19 John Adey Repton added a south-east wing.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

On the north-west side of the Hall are the remains of the north arm of the moat, spanned by a red-brick bridge but now dry and grassed over. This faces an open lawn beyond which, c 80m north-west of the Hall, stands the early C18 red-brick dovecote (listed grade II) beside the timber-framed and plastered coach house and stable block (listed grade II).

The main area of gardens lie to the south-east and north-east of the Hall. The garden enclosures to the north-east of the Hall are bounded partly by yew hedges and partly by brick walls, some of which date from the C16 (listed grade II) and are now (2000) mostly used as kitchen gardens (see below). The oldest section of wall runs north-east for c 85m from the north-east corner of the Hall. At the end of this wall stands a garden pavilion (listed grade II), known as the Prayer House since the early 1800s when it was remodelled and repointed but originally a C16 banqueting house. On the south-east side of the walled enclosures is a formal rose garden backed along its north-west boundary by a high early C19 red-brick wall, in the centre of which stands a thatched garden seat. The rose garden with its tall metal hoops may date from Humphry or John Adey Repton's involvement in the gardens, since a watercolour by John Adey, dated 1827, shows a rose garden with arches in roughly this position. The garden was however subject to a major remodelling in the late C19 (*CL* 1902). The rose garden faces south-west onto the main flower gardens laid in a parterre below the south-east front. Between the two stands a very mature cedar of Lebanon, thought by the owners to have been planted in 1670.

The parterre below the south-east front is separated from the Hall by three shallow grass terraces and has a central axis focused on the string of ponds beyond the gardens. Its beds and borders are now (2000) simplified and filled with roses and mixed shrubs.

PARK

The c 15ha park at Spains Hall lies to the south-east and south-west of the Hall, which stands in the north-east corner of the site close to Spainshall Farm. It is dominated by a string of fishponds which are aligned on the south-east front of the Hall and run out to the south-east boundary of the park in a series of falls. Originally eight in number, including one created out of the southern arm of the Hall moat, the third and fourth (joined together in the early C19) and the eighth survive with water in, those in between surviving in outline and still connected by a trickle of water through the woodland which has invaded the area since the late C19. The original layout of the ponds is recorded on Thomas Pope's 1618 estate plan for William Kempe. At the beginning of the C19, possibly following Repton's suggestions for softening the formality (1807 sketch plan), the pond nearest the Hall was turned into a lawn and others given slightly more irregular shapes. By 1898 (OS) three of the fishponds survived, although the lower one was silting up, leaving the upper and lower lakes which survive today (2000) together with the outline of three others in between.

The park to the north-east of the ponds is bounded by dense woodland, called Rooke Wood and Marsh Wood on the 1618 survey but now (2000) known as The Warren. On the south-west side of the ponds the undulating ground is partly under grass and partly under arable, with a thin scatter of mature oak trees, most densely concentrated in the vicinity of the Hall. The boundary of this part of the park has changed little since the 1618 survey although its character was altered during the early C19, its present (2000) disposition being clear by 1834 (Tithe map). Apart from the re-routing of the main drive which was not executed, Humphry Repton's plan is more concerned with the treatment of the ponds and the gardens than the park.

KITCHEN GARDEN

The walled kitchen garden lies immediately to the north-east of the Hall. It is partly divided into two areas by the C16 wall and Prayer House described above. To the south-east of the Prayer House the ground is laid to lawn, with a yew-hedged swimming pool enclosure (1960s) in one corner. To the north of the Prayer House are box-edged borders within which fruit and vegetables are cultivated, together with a range of early C19 glasshouse bases restored in the late C20. This area is enclosed to the north-east by a curved C19 red-brick wall. Some of the enclosures on this side of the Hall have existed since the 1618 survey was completed although the uses to which they have been put have changed over time. The kitchen garden was located here at the beginning of the C19 when Repton made marginal notes on his 1807 plan advising an extension to the north-east, over what had previously been a hop-ground. The date of the walls in this area suggests that his advice was followed here.

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